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“No antibiotics” says it all

“Antibiotic-free pork farming is the future.” This is the opinion of Danish farmer Stine Mikkelsen from the Baltic Sea island of Bornholm. She participated in the GOA pilot project and thus mastered a number of challenges.

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Danish pork marketers are so successful internationally because they always meet their customers' individual needs. For example, many years ago the pork sector established a special program for the British market called “UK Welfare”. Pork farmers and piglet producers must fulfill many strict requirements. This also applies to the branded media program Antonius that began in 1976. Farms taking part in this program can wean piglets at the earliest after 28 days and may not crop their tails. In addition, piglets and fattening pigs must be given around 30 percent more space than the law requires.

In 2015, the branch initiated a further pioneering pilot project: the so-called GOA program. The letters stand for “Gezüchtet ohne Antibiotika” – raised without antibiotics. GOA was developed by the Danish Crown slaughtering company in close cooperation with the SEGES Danish Pig Research Center in the Danish Association of Agriculture & Food Industry, Technical University of Denmark, University of Copenhagen and the Statens Serum Institute.

The pilot project is supported by the Danish Environment and Food Ministry. The government provides an equivalent of nearly two million euros in research funds from the “Green Development and Demonstration Program” (GUDP).



Farmer Stine Mikkelsen, GOA participant from the start, manages a pig weaning and fattening operation on the Baltic Sea island of Bornholm. Danish Agriculture & Food Council - Bild: Danish Agriculture & Food Council

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Rising demand expected

In the past year, the Danish Crown cooperative slaughtered and marketed some 200,000 pigs from the GOA program. “In our opinion, the demand for products from antibiotics-free production will continue to increase in the coming years”, says Søren Tinggaard, Vice President of Export at Danish Crown, referring here to the great interest in GOA goods from customers in the United States, Europe, Asia and Australia.

Since this summer, by the way, products from the program are also available in Germany. The intended goal is to continuously increase the slaughter numbers. By 2021, the company wants to handle 1.5 million pigs from antibiotic-free farms.

In the view of the Poul Bækbo, chief advisor in the SEGES Pig Research Center, even more is possible. “This form of antibiotic-free breeding and fattening can also be integrated into conventional farms. In the future, 20 to 30 percent of pigs reared in the country could completely go without such medication,” says Bækbo. However, this would require a constant focus on animal health and protection against epidemics as well as a high degree of hygiene. In addition, strict compliance with the in-out principle and the use of specially designed animal feed would be more important pillars for success.

Participant from the very start

Around 40 Danish pig farmers and piglet producers currently participate in the GOA project. According to the initiators, Danish farmers are very interested in taking part. Piglet production and fattening without antibiotics requires significantly more time for operational management.

This form of production is also cost-intensive, since the pigs grow more unevenly. To compensate for the significant added burden on farmers, producers receive a bonus from the Danish Crown cooperative for every fattening pig from antibiotics-free production.

A GOA participant from the start is Stine Mikkelsen. Together with her husband, she manages a piglet and pig-fattening farm on the Baltic Sea island of Bornholm. Mikkelsen annually raises around 14,500 piglets, of which 5,500 are fattened in their own company and the others sold to two regular customers.

“I think it’s a great idea. For years, we have been committed to the reduction of antibiotics in our farm as far as possible. Our motto is: as much as necessary and as little as possible,” according to the farmer. It is important for Mikkelsen to play an active role and be a so-called first mover. “If we can get an edge – as pioneers in this new form of production – it would be optimal,” says Mikkelsen.

Successfully managed challenges

Successful antibiotic-free breeding of pigs makes special demands on management as well as various other production parameters. “Animal feed cannot contain animal fat, blood or fish products. Doing completely without fish meal was a challenge, but we have found a good solution,” says Mikkelsen. Stall hygiene plays a central role in weaning. This is where producers rely on, among other things, potato flour and Stalosan that is strewn in the animal pens.

In antibiotic-free pig rearing, efficient disease protection is also a pillar of success. “This is where my training and work as a nurse comes in handy, because hygiene is also the A and O in that profession,” said the Danish farmer. Because of its location in a protected Bornholm nature area, the farm cannot expand further. This is also why the producers rely on the innovative concept. After approximately three years in the GOA project, Mikkelsen draws a positive conclusion. “Antibiotic-free breeding, in my opinion, is the way of the future.”

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